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SUBJECT: A/S FRIED'S DINNER WITH AZERBAIJANI RELIGIOUS ANALYSTS

BAKU 00001354 001.2 OF 004

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: At a November 4 dinner in honor of visiting EUR A/S Fried, leading religious analysts agreed that religiosity was on the rise in Azerbaijan, but disagreed on whether radicalism was also on the rise. Those who argued that radicalism was on the rise attributed it to a mix of foreign influences and domestic developments, including government control over society and the lingering effects of a Soviet education system that did not emphasize critical thinking skills. Several analysts noted that young women receive pressure from government officials - and from their families, who fear discrimination - not to wear the hijab. The analysts were all concerned about the Government of Azerbaijan's (GOAJ) handling of the recently foiled terrorist plot on the U.S. Embassy, worrying that the GOAJ's crackdown on terror targeted only pious Muslims and had the potential to exacerbate tensions between secular and pious Azerbaijanis. End Summary.

Wahhabism and Radicalization in Azerbaijan?

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¶2. (C) In honor of visiting Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Daniel Fried, the Ambassador hosted a November 4 dinner discussion with five local religious analysts and activists. The following Azerbaijani commentators attended:

Dr. Nariman Gasimoglu, Azerbaijan Center for Religion and Democracy

Ms. Aysel Vazirova, religious expert

Ms. Durdani Jafarli, religious expert

Mr. Sardar Yusifoglu, Chairman of the "Moral Development of Youth" NGO

Mr. Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, Head of the Center for the Protection of Freedom and Conscience of Religion (DEVAMM)

¶3. (C) A/S Fried and the Ambassador welcomed participants, saying they looked forward to hearing their views and learning more about religion in Azerbaijan. Responding to A/S Fried's question about the causes of religious radicalization in Azerbaijan and their implications, Gasimoglu said that radicalization had no roots in Azerbaijan, attributing the phenomenon to external sources such as Iran, Turkey, and Arab countries. Using the headscarf as an example, Gasimoglu said that today's style of headscarf was more similar to that worn in Iran or Turkey, not the traditional style seen before the Soviet period.

While acknowledging the role seventy years of Soviet influence had on the current religious reawakening in Azerbaijan, Gasimoglu said that Azerbaijanis were keener to articulate their religious views and values due to these outside influences as well.

¶4. (C) Vazirova disagreed with Gasimoglu, saying that the inability of Azerbaijanis to express their discontent and seek change was contributing to radicalization in the country. Asking what other avenues existed if a person could not express himself legally, Vazirova said that internal factors were the biggest contributing factor, and external factors a secondary factor due to the press of local issues. According to Vazirova, only a small percentage of Azerbaijani women wore the headscarf in a traditional (pre-Soviet period) manner, with today's women displaying it in a newer, yet distinct Azerbaijani way. Responding to A/S Fried's question about the nature of laws governing religious expression in Azerbaijan, Vazirova said that while there were no laws prohibiting the wear of headscarves by university students, informal hurdles were considerable, with university rectors and professors reportedly approaching covered students and strongly encouraging them to remove them.

¶5. (C) Recounting an earlier meeting with secular NGOs in which the NGOs told him that they did not consider religious expression or freedoms to be a threat, A/S Fried said that this was curious to him. Saying that in the U.S. religious expression was not seen as a challenge, Fried recounted an argument he had recently heard in France. Fried was told that one reason the French support a ban on headscarves in school was to allow girls the freedom to express themselves - by not wearing the headscarf - since they were under considerable pressure both at home and in the community to be covered. To this, Vazirova said that the headscarf issue was now being seen as a human rights issue in Azerbaijan. According to Vazirova's research, the evidence in Azerbaijan

BAKU 00001354 002.2 OF 004

was quite different from France, where women are seeking to wear the hijab, while families were pressuring them not to.

¶6. (C) Returning to the question of radicalization, A/S Fried told guests that nearly everyone except the Government of Azerbaijan (GOAJ) had talked about a democracy deficit in the country. Asking guests if this democracy deficit contributed to radicalization in Azerbaijan, Ibrahimoglu responded by saying that while most practicing Muslims in Azerbaijan were not becoming radicalized, internal and external factors were playing a role in the radicalization of all Azerbaijanis. According to Ibrahimoglu, the lack of free and fair elections, absence of an effective social welfare net, and price increases were contributing to the general unhappiness of all Azerbaijanis. To support his point that religious radicalization was not on the rise in the country, Ibrahimoglu said that the level of religiosity in Azerbaijan - Ibrahimoglu using mosque attendance figures as a basis - simply didn't support this assertion since fewer than one percent of Baku residents attended mosque on a regular basis.

Pointing out the religiosity was higher in the U.S. and even France, Ibrahimoglu argued that levels of religiosity would likely be higher if radicalization was taking place. Instead, Ibrahimoglu posited that the GOAJ was using this alleged threat simply to justify its authoritarian actions. Citing as an example the recent expulsion of eight girls from school in Zaqatala for wearing the hijab, Ibrahimoglu argued that the GOAJ was trying to equate wearing the hijab with Wahhabism.

¶7. (C) Responding to A/S Fried's point that Europe still sought to maintain its largely Christian identity while the U.S. had progressed to a largely multiconfessional society, Gasimoglu disagreed with Ibrahimoglu, saying that radicalization was in fact taking place in Azerbaijan. Recounting his previous efforts to have the Koran taught in the Azeri language and for speaking out publicly on the

headscarf issue, Gasimoglu said that his life had been repeatedly threatened, with authorities arresting several individuals for these threats. Arguing that these examples clearly demonstrated an up-tick in radicalization, Gasimoglu said that Azerbaijan was not as tolerant as it once was. To this, Ibrahimoglu argued that while he, too, had received death threats, this did not support the generalization that radicalization was taking place, simply that there were "currents." Saying that normal believers suffer more than radicals because of recent events such as the plot to attack the U.S. Embassy in Baku, Ibrahimoglu said that the fight against terror should not be turned into a fight against believers.

¶8. (C) Pressed to clarify whether he believed the alleged terrorists arrested for planning the attack on the Embassy were simply religious believers, Ibrahimoglu said that while no one denies there is a threat, it is not at the level being portrayed in the local media. He noted that not one of the suspects had been shown on television, something uncharacteristic in a country where suspects are shown repeatedly in the press. Ibrahimoglu then told A/S Fried that he did not want the international community to allow the GOAJ to limit space for religion, again citing the GOAJ's targeting of wearers of the hijab as a sign of "Wahhabism," according to the GOAJ. Ibrahimoglu said that his greatest fear was that the GOAJ would stoke a fight between believers and the secular population under the umbrella of "fighting terror."

¶9. (C) Vazirova said that it was important to establish the definition of radicalization because this term was loaded with meaning in Azerbaijan and used to describe many things, as is the term "Wahhabism." Vazirova said that if we were to think of radicalization as an openness to actions which are illegal, she believed that she did not see many signs of this at present. If, however, we were to define radicalization as a radicalization of thought (Vazirova meaning not being open to other ideas or interpretations), then Vazirova believed Azerbaijanis were becoming more radical. To support this view, Vazirova cited the radicalization of discussion in internet discussions and lectures, many being anti-Shia and increasingly negative and confrontational in nature. Responding to A/S Fried's question as to whether the profile of radicalism in Azerbaijan was Sunni in nature, many participants agreed.

¶10. (C) Vazirova noted that the lingering effects of the Soviet educational system made it difficult for Azerbaijanis

BAKU 00001354 003.2 OF 004

to critically evaluate the large amounts of religious information available. Pointing to the wide variety of books, CDs, brochures and other media in Azerbaijani entering the country from Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, Vazirova also said that translating and discussing these issues was a good thing. Saying that the Sunni-Shia divide was no more emotional than the Protestant-Catholic divide in the U.S., Ibrahimoglu argued that the wide variety of information and fora for religious discussions had toned down tensions considerably since the 1990s. According to Ibrahimoglu, it is far more dangerous not to have educational materials or discussions available than to communicate and explore issues openly.

¶11. (C) Jafarli also shared Ibrahimoglu's concern that the GOAJ was using the terror plot against the U.S. Embassy to increase pressure on pious Muslims. According to Jafarli, Azerbaijani families and society are not opposed to the wearing of the hijab, but the GOAJ is. Recognizing this, families are urging their daughters not to wear the hijab out of fear that they may not be able to enter university or secure a job once they have completed their studies. Citing recent examples of young women being denied the opportunity to take the university entrance examination because they either appeared wearing the hijab or submitting "improper"

paperwork, Jafarli told the Ambassador that she believed the GOAJ was clearly behind these steps. Pointing to the GOAJ's closure of state-organized Koranic courses four months ago due to a need for a "new curriculum," Jafarli said that the State Committee for Religious Affairs would not have ordered this without higher-level government clearance. Yusifoglu was also critical of the government's decision, saying that while all officially-registered courses had been closed, unofficial courses - often in mosques - continued. Saying that it did not make sense for the GOAJ to shut down courses in a more secure environment, while allowing them to go on in an insecure environment, possibly influenced by more radical ideologies, something he felt was contributing to more divisions within Islam. To Jafarli it was not clear why the GOAJ would deny for years the existence of extremist groups and suddenly reverse course and say they were a threat, a contradiction in her mind. While conceding that there was the potential for Wahhabism to threaten Azerbaijan's stability, Jafarli felt recent GOAJ steps targeting believers were only exacerbating tensions.

¶12. (C) Responding to A/S Fried's question as to what was driving the GOAJ to take these measures, Jafarli believed that these actions were being taken to prepare Azerbaijani society for future measures, possibly including a formal ban on the hijab at universities. While Ibrahimoglu attributed the GOAJ's pressure on the hijab issue to the AK Party's recent successes in Turkey, Vazirova said that she believed that at the core of the issue for most Azerbaijanis was a deep mistrust in people of faith possibly taking power and imposing their views - to include wearing of the hijab - on all Azerbaijanis. Noting that he worried about the authoritarian strain on civil society and resulting alienation, A/S Fried said that regimes often search for an external enemy, unfortunate because he believed so much could be going right in Azerbaijan. Adding that it was natural for post-Soviet states to rediscover their pre-Soviet roots seeking a natural cultural continuum, A/S Fried said that he was hopeful this would take place in a democratic context. Thanking his guests, A/S Fried reiterated the point that it was important that they knew that the U.S. was not hostile to Islam.

Comment

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¶13. (C) Azerbaijanis of all political persuasions agree that religiosity is on the rise in Azerbaijan. The degree to which this growing interest in and observance of religion will translate into political Islam is an issue we continue to assess. As was seen at this dinner, there was no clear agreement on the question of whether radicalization in Azerbaijan was on the increase, with figures such as Gasimoglu arguing that it was, while Ibrahimoglu only did so grudgingly. All the participants agreed that the government's tight control over political space in Azerbaijan certainly would contribute to the rise in extremism over time. We share their concerns, and continue to engage the government in a discussion of this issue.

¶14. (U) A/S Fried cleared this message.

BAKU 00001354 004.2 OF 004

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